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## JOHN H. FONDA'S EXPLORATIONS IN THE SOUTHWEST

CARDINAL GOODWIN

The purpose of this paper is to make known a practically overlooked explorer and trader in the Southwest. John H. Fonda's "Reminiscences of Early Wisconsin" were dictated by him to the editor of the *Prairie du Chien Courier*, and appeared in that paper between February and May, 1858. In 1867 the editor of the Wisconsin Historical Society republished the narrative in volume five of the Society's *Collections*.<sup>1</sup> The document is divided into twelve numbers. Number one, covering practically the first seven pages, contains the data relating to explorations and trade in the Southwest. The other numbers in the series deal with events pertaining to Wisconsin in particular with occasional references to incidents relating to the history of the Northwest. The purpose of the present writer is to call attention to the first number in the series.

It must be admitted that the account is not altogether satisfactory. It is taken from the reminiscences of an old man who drew largely upon his memory for the information set down in the document. It is a narrative, too, which he evidently found great pleasure in relating on many occasions during the declining years of a long life. The part of the document summarized

<sup>1</sup>See the Wisconsin Historical Society, *Collections*, V, 205-284. The following note is placed at the head of the document by the editor, and is self-explanatory:

"The following series of historical papers were written by the editor of the *Prairie du Chien Courier*, as dictated by the aged pioneer, whose name they bear, and appeared in that paper, commencing with the number of February 15, 1858, and extending into May following. 'We would advise all,' says the editor, 'to read the Early Reminiscences, as they are extremely interesting, and contain many historical facts, that will pay for the time spent in perusal. The subject of these sketches has been in the West for over forty years, and thirty years a resident of *Prairie du Chien*. He has lived to see most of the early pioneers carried to the grave. His life has been an eventful one, abounding in incidents of travel, camp and field, that will prove interesting to our readers. They are as correct and truthful as memory can make them.

"Mr. Fonda was born in Watervliet, Albany county, N. Y., and is still residing in *Prairie du Chien*. We have the high authority of the venerable Rev. Alfred Brunson, of *Prairie du Chien*, for assuring the reader that 'Mr. Fonda's narrative is as reliable as anything of the kind given from memory.'"

here is by no means as complete as the student would like to have it. There are annoying hiatuses and exasperating omissions. There are incidents barely mentioned concerning which much is to be written before our knowledge of the history of the Southwest is complete. But with all its faults there appear to be three reasons which justify calling attention to the document in the *SOUTHWESTERN HISTORICAL QUARTERLY*. First, it contains information which is valuable to students of southwestern history; second, it is taken from a source which investigators in the field might pass unnoticed; and third, it is given in that source under a heading which has resulted in its being overlooked by those who have worked in the history of the Southwest. In the following account a summary of trade and explorations in the Southwest as given by Fonda himself is presented almost entirely in his own words. An attempt has been made to point out obvious and probable errors of fact.

It was probably in the spring or early summer of 1819 when Fonda joined a company that was leaving Watervliet in Albany County, New York, for Texas. They proceeded to Buffalo and from there by boat to Cleveland. Thence they journeyed south through Ohio to Cincinnati, from which place they floated down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers on flat boats to Natchez. Here the boats were traded for horses, a covered wagon, and a team of mules. Having provided themselves with a complete outfit and buried one of the members of the party who had died from an attack of yellow fever, they were ferried across the Mississippi by an old trader "who charged an exorbitant price for his services—so much so, that I remember the company went on without paying him."

If they traveled directly west from Natchez as Fonda claims they reached the Red River southeast of Natchitoches, and must have passed the latter on their way up that stream. They ascended the Red River to Fort Towson, in the southeastern part of the present State of Oklahoma. Here they camped near a small stream which Fonda says was called Le Bontte Run,<sup>2</sup> and the emigrants utilized the time to rest and to perfect their plans. They finally determined "to settle on the prairie land near what

<sup>2</sup>Fort Towson is on Gates Creek (Century Atlas), a small stream which flows into the Red River near the mouth of the Kiamichi river. This was undoubtedly the stream which Fonda calls Le Bontte Run.

they called the Cross Timbers, a tract of country watered by numerous streams, well timbered, and with soil of the richest qualities." And continuing Fonda says: "But the novelty of the journey, promised at the start, had been sobered down to a stern reality during the last six months, and instead of accompanying the party into the then Mexican territory, I remained with a Scotchman who had taken a Choctaw squaw for a wife, and kept a trading post on the head waters of the Sabine River. With this Scotchman I stayed during the winter of 1819, and in the spring of 1820, went down to New Orleans, with five *voyageurs*, to get a keel-boat load of goods for the Scotch trader, who had entrusted me with the business, for he took a liking to me, and knew no other person in whom he could put as much confidence. The Red River was a narrow, crooked, turbid stream, steep banks on either side, and filled with snags; but the winter rains had swollen it, so we floated down without accident."

Here Fonda spent "eight or ten weeks" collecting merchandise and trying to keep the French *voyageurs* out of trouble. They "would go to some of the low dance houses in the town, and spree all night, which made them useless all the next day; so in one or two instances I was obliged to hire creoles to assist in loading goods that have been brought to the river."

One evening after the boat had been finally loaded and the men had pretty well recovered from the spree of the previous night Fonda gave orders to move up stream, but they refused to obey. On the night of that particular day "there was to be a grand fandango" in town to which the men had determined to go. As a result Fonda was compelled to remain on board the boat all night as guard.

Next morning the men came staggering in, and threw themselves down on the rolls of calico and blankets, where they slept until afternoon. About two o'clock they had all got up, and were preparing some food, when I gave them to understand that we must start at sundown. They gave no answer, and, having ate, they went to sleep again.

As the sun was going out of sight, I roused the men, directing them to get out the tow-line, poles, and to run up stream. They paid no attention to what I said, but gathered around one of their number, a big half-breed, who insolently told me that it would be impossible for us to ascend Red River, because of the high

water and the strong current at this season of the year. I knew the fellow was lying, for I had seen the river the last summer, and knew that if we had any trouble it would be from low water. And I was obliged to give the man a severe whaling, tying his hands and feet, and threatening the others with a similar dose, before they would go to their duty.

The men worked steadily that night, part of the time towing and poling, and sometimes taking advantage of the eddies in the lee of projecting points. The big half-breed begged to be released the next morning, and made no more trouble during the trip. The boat soon entered Red River, where we found sufficient water to float us, but had to make a number of portages before reaching what is called La Grange, a small French settlement (the French claimed all west of the Mississippi in those days), but the men did not offer to leave at this point, for they paid strict obedience to me since I punished their leader, and were growing more respectful each day as we approached the end of our journey.

We started in June, and had been gone three months, and it being September, I was anxious to get back, for the goods were much needed at the trading post.

On the 23d of September (I kept a journal), we were met about twenty miles below the trader's block-house by one of his half-breed sons, who had come to take command of the keel-boat and crew, so I might go ahead and give in my report of the trip, before the boat-men had a chance to make any of their usual complaints. This custom was undoubtedly a good one, though I did not take advantage of it to the detriment of the men, but gave a favorable report of everything. When the boat arrived, Mons. Jones, as the old Scotchman was called, met them as they landed, praised the men for their faithfulness, and paid them what little might be due them, giving to each a trifling present. Now, I had observed while acting as clerk the previous winter, that a few beads, paints or cheap calicoes, would purchase many valuable furs; and after going down with the bale of skins, I had learned how, after receiving the cargo of goods, that a considerable sum was placed to my employer's credit, which made the fur trade appear very profitable in my eyes. So I readily agreed to receive what wages were due me, in goods, hoping to make a large profit on them. The old Scotchman did not seem overpleased with the goods I had selected by his direction; however, he paid me with some of them.

And thus ended my connection with the first and last expedition that I ever accompanied on Red River, or the lower Mississippi, and also the detailed account of it, which is as correct as memory will allow me to relate.

Throughout the fall and winter of 1820 Fonda says that he clerked for the Scotchman but that he had very few opportunities to sell goods on his own account. His employer had been "an *engage* of the Hudson Bay Fur Company, and was exceedingly grasping, and would not let me buy fur on private account, anywhere near the trading post." In order to find a market where he could carry on trade with the Indians without coming into direct competition with his employer, he made "several excursions among the Shawnee and Osage Indians, from whom I got a few packs of valuable fur.<sup>3</sup> But, though there was an excitement about a trader's life that had a charm for me, yet often, when camped by a sheltered spring, ambition would whisper, 'You have another mission to fulfill.'"

Following these whisperings of ambition occurs a leap of two years in the narrative. In the spring of 1823, "soon after the grass was well up," Fonda left for Santa Fé, "along with two fellows who had come up from New Orleans." He rode a "mustang colt" and placed his "trappings on board an old pack-mule." They traveled west "to the source of the Red River, through the Comanche country, north to the forks of the Canadian River where we took the old Santa Fe trail, which led us over and through the southern spur of the Rocky Mountains, to Santa Fe, where we arrived without any of those thrilling adventures, or Indian fights, that form the burden of many travelers' stories."

They saw no Indians at all except a party of "Kioways" with whom Fonda tried to carry on trade.

The exact route which Fonda took from the source of the Red

<sup>3</sup>During the month of May, 1819, Thomas Nuttall had made a trip from Fort Smith, Arkansas, to the mouth of the Kiamichi river. He had come with Major Bradford and a company of soldiers who, in obedience to orders which Bradford had received from Washington, were to remove the white settlers from "the territory occupied by the Osages, the Kiamichi river being now chosen as the line of demarcation."

Nuttall says there were supposed to be twenty families of whites living at the mouth of the Kiamichi and twelve "at Pecan Point, a few miles down Red River." Many of them were a "very bad lot of settlers," having "the worst moral character imaginable, being many of them renegades from justice." See Thomas Nuttall, *A Journal of travel into the Arkansas Territory during the year 1819, with occasional observations on the manners of the aborigines*, Philadelphia, 1821, ch. IX, particularly pp. 206-222. The edition cited here is in Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, Vol. XIII.

These white settlers had been removed then before Fonda came into the country.

River to Santa Fé is difficult to determine. Of course he did not reach the forks of the Canadian if he went to the source of the Red River and there turned north. The forks of the Canadian are almost north of Fort Towson, the point from which he started. He is probably referring to the forks made by the union of the Mustang Creek with the Canadian River in northwestern Texas.<sup>4</sup> It is equally certain that he did not strike the Santa Fé trail at the point where it crossed the Canadian River. He doubtless reached the Canadian River when he turned north from the Red at the mouth of Mustang Creek as already indicated or at the mouth of Major Long's Creek. Here he probably came upon "the much frequented Indian trail crossing the creek, from the west, and following down along the east bank,"<sup>5</sup> to which Long refers. This he probably thought was the Santa Fé trail. If he took the route thus indicated he went west along the Canadian finally reaching the San Miguel, whence he followed the Santa Fé trail to Santa Fé.

Soon after arriving in Santa Fé Fonda lost track of his traveling companions. He then went to Taos, where he spent the winter of 1823 and 1824. Here he found a village in which the "houses were all one story high, and built of clay or large gray brick." The inhabitants were Spaniards, Mexicans, "Indians, a mixed breed," and a few trappers. The town was a "lively wintering place, and many were the fandangoes, frolics, and fights which came off" during the winter.

By May, 1824, Fonda had become thoroughly disgusted with Taos and its inhabitants, "for the latter were a lazy, dirty, igno-

<sup>4</sup>The map used in this instance is that of Department of Interior, General Land Office; United States, including Territories and Insular Possessions, 1918. There are some maps which give the Big Blue Creek as the principal fork of the Canadian at this point. Cf. Department of Interior, United States Geological Survey, 1914, and the map in the Century Atlas.

<sup>5</sup>Edwin James (compiler), *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburg to the Rocky Mountains, performed in the years 1819 and 1820, by order of the Hon. J. C. Calhoun, Secretary of War, under the command of Major Stephen H. Long*, 2 Vols., Philadelphia, 1823. II, 94. Continuing, Long says this "trace consisted of more than twenty parallel paths, and bore sufficient marks of having been recently traveled, affording an explanation of the cause of the alarming scarcity of game we had for some time experienced. We supposed it to be the road leading from the Pawnee Piqua village, on Red River, to Santa Fe."

Long had passed through this country in August, 1820. His route from here east into the Arkansas territory, however, was north of that over which Fonda traveled in 1823.

rant set, and, as a whole, possessed less honor than the beggarly Winnebagoes about Prairie du Chien, at the present time" (1858).

Leaving Taos Fonda returned to Santa Fé where he found a company of traders who were preparing to cross the plains to Missouri. He soon became acquainted with a man by the name of Campbell, who was a merchant from St. Louis. The latter engaged the explorer "to oversee the loading and unloading of his three wagons, whenever it was necessary to cross a stream, which frequently happened."

The trip from Santa Fé to St. Louis proved to be "a hard journey," and one that Fonda "never cared to repeat." The "caravan of wagons, cattle, oxen, horses, mules left Santa Fé in good condition," but many of them died before the company reached the Missouri River—the animals from thirst and exhaustion, and the men from sickness and disease. The survivors reached St. Louis in October, "which place I saw for the first time, and Campbell having no further need of my services paid me in hard Mexican dollars, and I left him."

Fonda's estimate of the country through which they passed is interesting in view of the comments made by other explorers who had passed through parts of the same region at an earlier period. He thought "that the barren country, east of the Canadian River, would, at some day, prove valuable. It is rich in minerals. The ground in some places was covered with pieces of crustated substance, that tasted like saleratus. There were several springs of a volcanic nature."<sup>6</sup>

The data which Fonda gives for his journey from Santa Fé to Missouri are doubtless correct. There was an expedition which reached the Missouri River in the fall of 1823 at about the time Fonda says he arrived there, but the description which he gives does not fit this particular company. He refers to a "caravan of wagons, cattle, oxen, horses, and mules." Wagons were probably

<sup>6</sup>For Long's wholesale condemnation of the country east of the Rocky Mountains, west of Missouri, and south of the forty-ninth parallel, see Long's "Account of an expedition from Pittsburg to the Rocky Mountains," in Thwaites, *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, XVII, 147, 148. For an estimate somewhat similar to Fonda's made by a man who explored in the Southwest between the period of Long's and Fonda's explorations, see *The Journal of Jacob Fowler, narrating an adventure from Arkansas through the Indian Territory, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico to the sources of the Rio Grande del Norte, 1821-22*. Coues ed., New York, 1898.



not used by the company of 1823.<sup>7</sup> In fact, wagons were not extensively used in the Santa Fé trade before 1824. The expedition which went out from Franklin, Missouri, in May of that year consisted of eighty-one men, one hundred and fifty-six horses and mules, twenty-three wagons, and carried about \$30,000 worth of merchandise.<sup>8</sup> Among the members of the party were M. M. Marmaduke, who later became governor of Missouri, and Augustus Storrs, who went to Santa Fé as United States consul in 1825, both of whom have left accounts of the expedition which are cited below. The members of this same company with whom Fonda returned arrived in Franklin, Missouri, on September twenty-ninth, after an absence of four months and ten days.<sup>9</sup> This would make it possible for him to have reached St. Louis in the early part of October, the month during which he claims to have arrived in that city.

<sup>7</sup>Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 3 Vols., New York, 1902, II, 505.

<sup>8</sup>*Answers of Augustus Storrs of Missouri to certain queries upon the origin, present state, and future prospect, of trade and intercourse between Missouri and the internal provinces of Mexico, propounded by the Hon. Mr. Benton*, Washington, 1825. In U. S. Docs., 18th Cong., 2nd Sess., Doc. No. 7, p. 3. See also Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, II, 505.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 7, and M. M. Marmaduke, *Journal on the Santa Fe trail*, published in the "Missouri Historical Review" for October, 1911, pp. 1-10.